

WESTERN NEWS

Libby MT 59923

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40 Thanks governor

Gov. Judy Martz leaves office in less than two weeks. No governor has done more for Libby in the past half century than Gov. Martz. For that we owe her a large debt of gratitude.

Just over three years ago, the governor made a 15-minute speech in Libby that many people believed played a large role in her being a one-term governor. Many other detractors will say Martz should have never inhabited the governor's mansion and was doomed to be a one-term governor.

In December 2001, I personally thought Martz committed political suicide with that 15-minute speech. I don't doubt the governor knew her actions would be controversial within her political party and within the community of Libby. But she felt she had to do the right thing. I believe she did.

"After many months of careful, thoughtful research and analysis, I have made my decision regarding the proposed Superfund designation for Libby. I wanted you to hear it first and I wanted you to hear it from me."

Martz journeyed to Libby a couple of days before Christmas to hold a meeting with the community, a meeting, which included considerable state and national press coverage. And she kept it on the positive.

"In my first year as governor, this community and my administration have worked through many challenges. Like you, we have wrestled with what would be the best solution for this community."

"I cannot thank you enough for always being forthright with me. I greatly appreciate the honest, respectful dialogue we have experienced through this process."

"I have learned from this community and the people at the heart of her. I have looked into your eyes and seen the pain and the frustration you have felt. And I understand your deep convictions to make your community whole again."

"The people of Libby represent everything that is right about America. You are honest, hardworking people, with a deep sense of community and pride."

Martz understood the economic downturns this community, this area, has faced over the past 15 years. And she knew what we were going through with the nation's attention focused on the Libby problem due to a seemingly endless stream of media coverage and discoveries by the EPA. She recognized that and respected the people who live and work here.

"This is a community that has seen some rough times, yet you remain committed to working toward a better future. A new day is dawning in Libby. It will dawn on the strengths of the people that call this town home."

Previous to her Dec. 20 speech in Libby, Martz made a couple of visits to Libby and met with the EPA, met with asbestos victims and met with local merchants. She faced a lot of hostility but pressed on in attempting to learn what had happened and what was happening in Libby.

"This has been a long decision-making process. I have had numerous questions for the EPA, the people of Libby, W.R. Grace, and others involved in this designation.

"I have taken a measured approach in order to gain the information needed to make the best decision for Libby.

"As governor, I do not have the luxury of posturing for the sake of politics. I don't have the luxury of making promises that I cannot deliver. Together, we are going to figure out a way to make Libby a vibrant economy again. Building on the relationship we've forged, we will bring good paying jobs back to this town. We will work together to plan a brighter future.

"That is why today, I am announcing my decision to support a Superfund designation for Libby. But I am not just here to support the designation. In addition, I am here to announce that I will utilize Montana's one and only Silver Bullet."

Martz put some conditions on that use of the Silver Bullet, and she apparently got the EPA's agreement on those conditions. She asked that the cleanup area be divided into "operable units" that could be de-listed as soon as possible making the Superfund area smaller and smaller as cleanup work continued. Second, she wanted the cleanup done in three years. We're pushing five now and the best estimates seem to have the EPA here for 7-9 years if we are lucky. And if the federal government doesn't find a way to figure out how to forget us once again.

"A prolonged cleanup is not acceptable to this community or me. I want the EPA to commit to moving this cleanup as quickly as possible."

Martz wanted businesses and residents not held financially responsible for the cleanup activities. Perhaps there is a lawsuit there against the feds? The prolonged cleanup is having a financial impact besides cutbacks to the EPA's original intention.

The fourth condition that the governor wanted was local employees employed as much as possible in cleanup activities.

That wasn't Martz's last visit to Libby. She came again on the eve of the plywood plant closing to assure us she would do whatever was possible to help us. She said the right things and encouraged us to continue working together toward a brighter future.

And she has returned several other times to get updates on the cleanup, on the actuarial study she initiated and on economic development issues.

Now I know that granting Libby the go-ahead for cleanup or the "Silver Bullet" didn't keep Martz from a second term. There were too many miscues and run-ins with the media and state citizen groups statewide that contributed to her political demise. But I do believe her actions in Libby on Dec. 20 did not resonant well with an important constituency within her own party. Some people believe that a result of that is she didn't have the political backing or support needed to avoid the problems and pitfalls that plagued her term.

We owe the governor a sincere thanks at this time. What she did was extremely important for us to move forward on the cleanup and eventual economic turnaround, of which we are now seeing evidence.

"I am committed to the community of Libby. We have come a long way together and we have a long way yet to go. But I want you to know, I will work with you. I want to see a sign in the future at each entrance of Libby - 'Libby is open for business'. God Bless you, and from the bottom of my heart, have a Merry Christmas."

Thank you Judy, and Merry Christmas!